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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000856

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TAGS: PGOV PREL VE PM
SUBJECT: PANAMA-VENEZUELA: CHAVEZ NOT VISITING; ROSALES
VISITS

Classified By: Ambassador William A. Eaton. Reasons:
1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) "Chavez will not be coming to the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OASGA)," Panamanian First VP and FM Samuel Lewis told Ambassador on May 23. A relieved Lewis added that President Martin Torrijos would not make a stop-over in Caracas on his way to Rio de Janeiro. (Note: Torrijos departed on May 23 for Rio de Janeiro, and Lewis traveled with him.) Meanwhile, former Venezuelan presidential candidate Manuel Rosales completed a four-day visit to Panama City on May 23. Rosales met together with former Presidents Mireya Moscoso Ernesto "El Toro" Perez Balladares, and Guillermo Endara as well as opposition party leaders and business leaders. Rosales also had significant contact with the media conducting radio, television, and newspaper interviews. Chavez's impending revocation of the license of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) served as Rosales' touchstone for his public and private comments. Rosales' criticism of Chavez's assault on Venezuela's democracy in general and on press freedoms in particular received a warm and empathetic reception. Yanny Jeanett, General Coordinator of A New Time's International Policy Committee, underscored that the purpose of the visit was "to underscore the democratic deficit that threatens Venezuela." Relieved not to have to weigh an invitation, Lewis asserted that Rosales had not requested a meeting with him or any other GOP official. Lewis explained that the message had been passed to Rosales that he should not use Panama as a "platform to launch a campaign against Chavez," arguing instead that Panama could play a more useful role as a "valid interlocutor" with Chavez. Panamanian opposition leaders criticized Torrijos for not receiving Rosales. End Summary

Rosales' Jammed Schedule

¶2. (U) On May 21, Mayin Correa interviewed Rosales on her top-rated, morning drive time radio talk show. Following the interview, Rosales met with the secretary general of the following Panamanian opposition parties: Patriotic Union (UP), Panamenista, Movement of Liberals and National

Republicans (MOLIRENA), and Democratic Change (CD). CD Operations Chief Ricardo Quijano told POLCOUNS May 23 that Rosales had greatly impressed these opposition leaders with his clear and cogent presentation of Chavez's challenges to democratic norms in Venezuela. "He left no doubt in our minds that Venezuela's opposition deserves our support," Quijano said. Following his meeting with opposition leaders, Rosales met with governing Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) allies from the Popular Party (PP) and the Liberal Party (PL). CD President (and presidential pre-candidate) Ricardo Martinelli told the press, "It seems that Venezuela is headed for a civil dictatorship lead by Chavez."

¶3. (U) On the evening of May 21, Rosales had dinner with former presidents Endara, Perez Balladares, and Moscoso, who undertook to lobby FMs who would attend the OASGA June 3-5 to work to keep RCTV open. Moscoso told the press that what was happening in Venezuela was "lamentable," noting Panama had "suffered 21 years of dictatorship." Perez Balladares commented to the press, "We are very worried about the closing of RCTV, something that signifies a measure to limit the freedom of expression, one of the most precious things we have in a democracy."

¶4. (U) Rosales began May 22 with an interview on Luci Molinar's top-rated television/radio morning talk show. At 11:00 a.m., he held a press conference at the Sheraton Hotel during which a small group pro-Chavez demonstrators, mostly from Panama's National Front to Defense Social Security (FRENADESSO), clamored outside the hotel. Rosales then held a roundtable with Panama's National Council of Private Businesses (CONEP) and later met with the Panamanian Association of Executives of Businesses (APEDE). In his meetings with CONEP and APEDE, Rosales focused on "the disrespect of the government of Venezuela for the norms and promises of the Inter-American Democratic Charter."

Lewis: Rosales Never Asked to See Me

¶5. (C) Sensitive to criticism that no GOP officials met with Rosales, Lewis asserted, "Rosales never asked to see me or any other government officials." Lewis noted that he was glad that he did not face a decision of whether or not to see Rosales since he had never received a request. Lewis meekly offered that National Assembly VP Jorge "Popo" Alvarado and two unnamed PRD deputies met with Rosales. Lewis explained that the GOP told Rosales that he should not use Panama as a "platform to launch a campaign against Chavez;" instead Panama could play a more useful role as a "valid interlocutor" with Chavez. At the same time though, Lewis was happy to report that Chavez would not be attending the OASGA. Lewis said that Panama had been successful in convincing the Venezuelans that it would not be a good idea to attend this largely ministerial-level meeting. He added that Chavez had miscalculated the blow-back across the hemisphere against his decision to rescind RCTV's license, something that encouraged Chavez to stay away from the OASGA. Lewis stated that Torrijos would not make a stop-over in Caracas en route to Rio de Janeiro and said that Panama was still withholding agreement for Venezuela's new ambassador to Panama, a matter that was becoming a growing irritant in the Panama-Venezuela relationship.

Comment

¶6. (C) Rosales' visit to Panama was a success: his case against Chavez received a warm, empathetic reception and resonated with a Panamanian public that still remembers clearly its own 21-year dictatorship that ended in 1989. From his vantage point, Lewis -- putting the Rosales visit behind him and turning off the prospective Chavez visit -- also achieved success. Once again, Panama has navigated uncomfortable political realities in its effort to sustain its foreign policy of seeking friendly relations with all

nations that seek friendly relations with it, including Venezuela and Cuba. While Lewis desires to continue to hold Panama forward as a "valid interlocutor" with Venezuela, it is not clear that there is much substance to any Panama-Venezuela discussions. Ultimately, post assesses that Panama will relent and grant agreement to Venezuela's proposed new ambassador.

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